

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

APR 16 2008

## National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

### 1. Name of Property

historic name Besse Hotel

other name/site number N/A

### 2. Location

street & town 121 East 4<sup>th</sup> Street N/A not for publication

city or town Pittsburg N/A vicinity

state Kansas code KS county Crawford code 037 zip code 66762

### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally. ( ☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Patrick Zollner 12/4/07  
Signature of certifying official/Title Patrick Zollner/Deputy SHPO Date

Kansas State Historical Society  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. ( ☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

### 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

- ☐ entered in the National Register.  
☐ See continuation sheet.
- ☐ determined eligible for the  
National Register  
☐ See continuation sheet.
- ☐ determined not eligible for the  
National Register.
- ☐ removed from the National  
Register.
- ☐ other, (explain:) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Besse Hotel  
Name of Property

Crawford County, KS  
County and State

## 5. Classification

**Ownership of Property**  
(check as many boxes as apply)

- ☒ private  
☐ public-local  
☐ public-State  
☐ public-Federal

**Category of Property**  
(check only one box)

- ☒ building(s)  
☐ district  
☐ site  
☐ structure  
☐ object

**Number of Resources within Property**  
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
1		Total

**Name of related multiple property listing**  
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

N/A

## 6. Function or Use

**Historic Function**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/Hotel

## Current Function

(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/Multiple Dwelling

## 7. Description

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

LATE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY AND EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY REVIVAL/  
Late Gothic Revival

## Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation	Concrete
walls	Brick
	Cast Stone
roof	Asphalt
other	N/A

## Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

☒ See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 7

Besse Hotel  
Name of Property

Crawford County, KS  
County and State

## 8. Description

### Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

### Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ **B** removed from its original location.
- ☐ **C** a birthplace or grave.
- ☐ **D** a cemetery.
- ☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ **F** a commemorative property.
- ☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

### Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

## 9. Major Bibliographical References

### Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

### Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

### Areas of Significance

(enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE

COMMERCE

### Period of Significance

1927-1957

### Significant Dates

1927

### Significant Persons

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

### Cultural Affiliation

N/A

### Architect/Builder

Schmitt, William T. (architect)

Hawk & Parr (architect)

☒ See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 8

### Primary location of additional data:

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- X University (Pittsburg State University)
- ☐ Other Name of repository:

☒ See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 9

Besse Hotel  
Name of Property

Crawford County, KS  
County and State

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre

### UTM References

(Place additional boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

1 1/5 34/9/2/4/8 4/1/4/1/6/5/9  
Zone Easting Northing

2 / / / / / / / / / / /  
Zone Easting Northing

3 / / / / / / / / / / /  
Zone Easting Northing

4 / / / / / / / / / / /  
Zone Easting Northing

### Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property.)

Lots 1 thru 7, inclusive, Platytters & Rhodes Subdivision, Pittsburg, Crawford County, Kansas.

### Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundary of the nominated property corresponds to the lots historically occupied by the building.

☐ See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 10

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Elizabeth Rosin, Partner and Rachel C. Nugent, Associate  
organization Rosin Preservation, LLC date 31 October 2007  
street & number 215 West 18<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite 150 telephone 816-472-4950  
city or town Kansas City state MO zip code 64108

### Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

#### Continuation Sheets

**Maps** A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

**Photographs:** Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

**Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

### Property Owner

name/title Downtown Pittsburg Housing Partners, LP  
street & number 7301 Mission Road, Suite 212 telephone 913-362-9816  
city or town Prairie Village state KS zip code 66208

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

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Besse Hotel  
Crawford County, Kansas

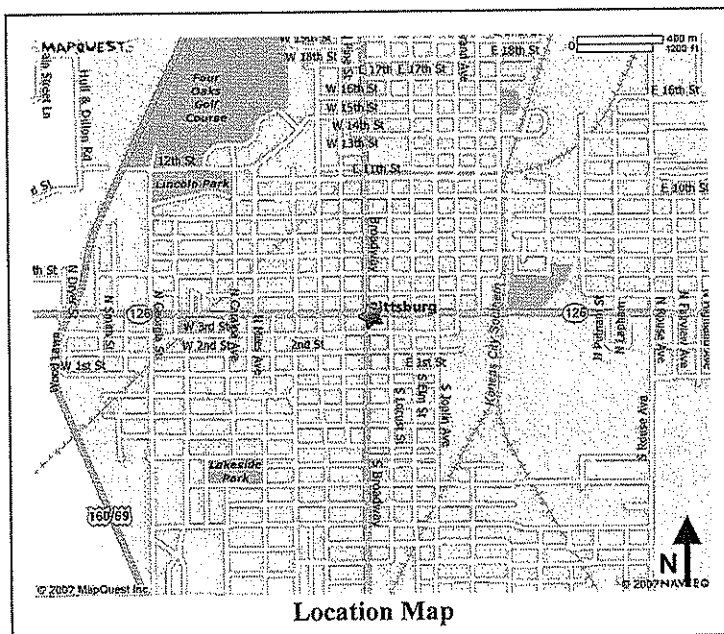
**SUMMARY**

The Besse Hotel is located at 112 East 4<sup>th</sup> Street, Pittsburg, Crawford County, Kansas. The twelve-story reinforced concrete structure has a dark reddish-brown brick exterior highlighted with Late Gothic Revival cast stone trim. The flat roof has a deteriorated asphalt surface surrounded by a low parapet with cast stone coping. At grade the footprint of the building is rectangular, abutting the property line on all four sides. Above the second story the footprint becomes L-shaped as a series of set-backs on the north, east and west shrinks the massing. The ziggurat massing creates asymmetrical façades, but within each façade the placement of window openings defines a regular pattern of vertical bays on the upper stories that aligns with the commercial storefronts at street level. The side and rear elevations lack ornament except for cast stone belt courses that encircle the upper stories of the tower. On the interior, the lobby retains its historic mezzanine railing and terrazzo floors, although partition walls partially obscure the original volume of the space. Guest rooms flanking the double-loaded corridors on the upper floors have been combined and redecorated over the years as the building evolved from a hotel into residential apartments. Despite these changes in use and décor, the building retains sufficient integrity to convey its significance as a grand early-twentieth century hotel constructed in a small southeastern Kansas city.

**ELABORATION**

**SITE**

Located in the heart of downtown Pittsburg, the Besse Hotel occupies the eastern half of the 100 block on the north side of East 4<sup>th</sup> Street, a parcel bounded by a public alley on the west; a surface parking lot on the north; and North Locust Street on the east. At the first story, the footprint occupies the entire parcel, with 170 feet fronting East 4<sup>th</sup> Street and 90 feet fronting North Locust Street. The site is relatively flat, with concrete sidewalks directly abutting the building.



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mechanical floor); the fourth section is two bays wide and nine stories tall; the fifth section is three bays wide and seven stories tall. Each bay has only one window, except for the first section which has paired windows in each bay. A cast stone string course, six courses of brick headers, and cast stone coping cap each section. This detail is also repeated at the eleventh story of the central section.

Cast stone ornament and blond brick highlights convey the building's Late Gothic Revival style. The trim includes horizontal belt courses below the second story windows and near the top of each set back; slender window frames with floating key stones at the second story windows; slender "buttresses" at the base of the building and decorative panels above some upper story windows in each building section. Tracery, including rosettes and croquettes, adorns the rectangular and gabled panels. The simulated buttresses are slender, angular fingers of cast stone that rise from the sidewalk to the center of the third story, separating the original storefront spaces along East 4<sup>th</sup> Street and North Locust Street. Some of the rectangular panels above the upper story windows have blond brick infill and blond brick forms a two story recessed arch above the main entrance.

The hotel has entrances on East 4<sup>th</sup> Street and on North Locust Street. Below the recessed arch, the main hotel entrance is centered at the base of the third, tallest section of the building facing East 4<sup>th</sup> Street. The arched cast stone surround has exaggerated voussoirs and quoins. Above the entrance a recessed, blond brick arch rises from the second floor to the fourth floor. The secondary entrance facing North Locust Street has a flared metal canopy. Both entrances have newer, aluminum-framed doors. The openings adjacent to the doors have been filled with stucco.

All of the storefronts have been altered significantly. Some are completely covered by yellow stucco panels; others have modern metal and glass storefront systems. Only one storefront on East 4<sup>th</sup> Street remains in operation and has signage attached to the façade above its entrance. A continuous wood-shingled projecting eave, a style sometimes referred to as "Buckaroo Revival," covers the three storefronts immediately east of the main entrance. All of the original doors have been replaced by metal or wood-framed doors.

Windows throughout the building have a one-over-one double-hung configuration. All of the window openings have rowlock brick sills that tilt away from the building wall with the exception of those openings that abut a cast stone stringcourse or that have a decorative cast stone surround. The original wood sashes are generally in poor condition. Some have been replaced with aluminum sashes.

**INTERIOR**

The Besse Hotel retains much of its original fabric and layout on the interior, although alterations occurred when the building converted from a hotel to an apartment building. Most notably, on the first floor, commercial storefronts and other hotel-related service spaces were combined to form residential units around the perimeter of

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Crawford County, Kansas

the lobby. Multiple guestrooms were similarly grouped on the upper floors to create larger apartments. Cast concrete pilasters and ceiling beams remain exposed in many of the upper floor units. Original plaster walls and ceilings are painted, although some walls have wall covering. Non-historic gypsum board walls have similar treatments. With the exception of the lobby and the bathrooms, carpet covers the concrete floors. The lobby has terrazzo floors, and bathroom floors are tiled. Other exceptions are noted in the description below.

Lobby

The dominant feature of the lobby is the original open mezzanine at the center of the first and second floors. Two wood pilasters on the south wall and one on the west wall are structural elements that become visible piers on the second floor above the open mezzanine. A low wood railing with a starburst pattern surrounds the mezzanine. Between the railing and the tops of the pilasters is a plaster cornice embellished with a pattern of circles.

There are two passenger elevators on the east wall of the lobby. The outer elevator doors have been altered, but the north elevator cab appears to be original. Immediately east of the elevators, sharing the same shaft is a concrete stair that rises all the way through the building. This narrow stairwell has a continuous concrete half-wall that forms a railing connected to the stair structure. At each floor there is a small, narrow window and a heavy metal fire door to protect the integrity of the fire-stair.

An open, dog-legged stairwell in an alcove at the west end of the lobby provides access to the mezzanine. The treads and risers of this stair are terrazzo. The railing has metal balusters that form a geometric pattern. The square newel post and handrail are wood.

North of the elevators is a hallway leading to the Locust Street entrance. Wood pilasters paneled with full-length mirrors punctuate the hallway walls.

Finishes in the lobby are generally typical. The space retains much of its historic terrazzo floor. The terrazzo has an inset diamond pattern of one-inch ceramic tiles. From the main entrance vestibule, the terrazzo continues into the lobby while the three courses of tri-colored tiles create a border around the room. Some historic wood paneling remains, framing the elevators on the east wall and in several of the 1<sup>st</sup> floor apartments, where space from the public lobby has become part of dwelling units. There are also wood-paneled pilasters in the corridors leading to the entrances on 4<sup>th</sup> Street and Locust Street. The corridor to the Locust Street entrance also retains crown molding that wraps around the pilasters. The corridors have dropped ceilings.

Mezzanine

North of the stair on the mezzanine level is a wood-paneled wall with an arched opening. This opening leads to a hallway with an entrance into a room originally called the "Collegiate Room" and later the "Swedish Room" that

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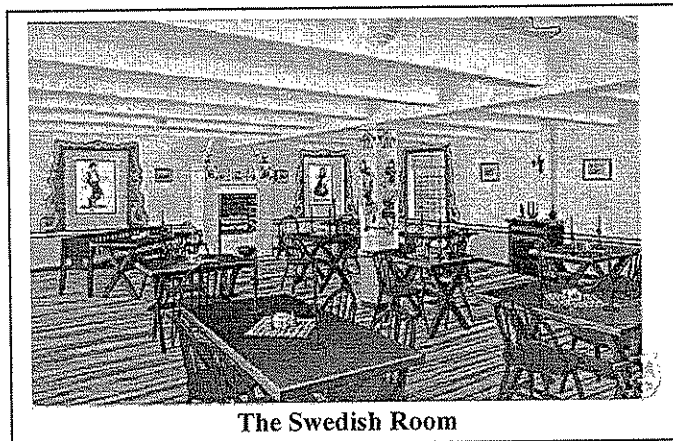
Besse Hotel  
Crawford County, Kansas

was used for dining and private receptions. When it was converted into an apartment, a wall with a pair of wide arched openings was added to divide the space in half and wood ceiling beams were added to room containing the fireplace.

### Upperfloors

On the upper floors, the historic configuration and finishes of the corridors generally remain intact. West of the elevators the corridors are single-loaded and north of the elevators they are double-loaded.

Each floor also retains small service rooms and janitor's closets with original terrazzo floors. Non-historic piping and electrical conduit run the length of the hallways just below the ceilings. Most of the original doorways retain small, operable transom windows, although many of the historic two-panel doors have been replaced. Some of the hotel room entrances were in-filled when the building was converted to apartments. Surviving transom windows appear above a blank wall where this has occurred.



The Swedish Room

Within the units, several changes reflect the consolidation of the original hotel rooms into apartments. Kitchens and a variety of built-ins have been added to each unit, and most of the apartment units have multiple bathrooms. The bathrooms retain ceramic tile or terrazzo floors in many locations, and a few original bathroom fixtures are extant throughout the building.

The apartment units also retain distinctive historic features, such as the exposed cast concrete ceiling beams that prominently cut through each room and shallow concrete pilasters that bump out from the walls. Between the ceiling beams and the tops of the windows, a narrow wood picture rail molding encircles many of the rooms. Many of the original interior doors for bathrooms and closets also remain. The windows have no trim other than simple wood sills. Short wood baseboards and simple casings at each historic doorway are also typical.

Cast iron radiators heat the building. Many of the radiators have decorative covers. The apartment units have window air conditioner units.

### INTEGRITY

The Besse Hotel's Late Gothic Revival architecture, stepped massing, and fire proof construction are readily visible on the exterior and interior. Other distinctive interior features, such as the lobby's terrazzo floor, the treatment of the mezzanine, the corridor configuration, and many of the period-specific finishes, also remain



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intact. Where integrity is compromised, the alterations generally reflect the conversion of the building from a hotel into residential apartments. For example, on the first floor of the historic hotel lobby back-of-house areas and commercial storefronts were absorbed into residential units and on the upper floors multiple historic guestrooms were consolidated into larger apartment units. General remodeling also resulted in updated finishes throughout the building. On the exterior, change is most noticeable at the commercial storefronts, most of which have been altered over time to accommodate a variety of commercial tenants and later to reduce the window openings for residential tenants. None of these changes diminishes the historical significance of the building or the architectural qualities for which it is being nominated. It remains the tallest structure in Pittsburg, a unique example of stepped massing and Late Gothic Revival architecture in the community, and a testament to the local civic pride that conceived of and financed its construction over eighty years ago.

**SUMMARY**

The Besse Hotel is a twelve-story fire-proof concrete structure located at the northwest corner of East 4<sup>th</sup> Street and North Locust Street in downtown Pittsburg, Crawford County, Kansas. Significant under Criterion A for the area of COMMUNITY PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT and under Criterion C for the area of ARCHITECTURE, the hotel was the vision of several prominent local businessmen who believed the project would promote the prosperity and civic pride in the growing southeast Kansas community. When outside developers did not materialize to fund the project, the local citizenry rallied to purchase the site and to fund construction of what remains Pittsburg's largest commercial building. The design by architects W. T. Schmitt and Hawk & Parr of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma utilized a traditional three-part building form, popular Late Gothic Revival architectural ornament, and a modern ziggurat massing. They also provided the Besse Hotel with the latest technologies for life safety and visitor convenience, such as a fireproof reinforced concrete structure and private baths in each room. The period of significance, 1926 - 1957, begins with the construction of the hotel and ends at the arbitrary fifty-year cut-off set by the National Register program.

**ELABORATION**

**EARLY GROWTH OF PITTSBURG**

In the fifty years following its founding in 1876, the city of Pittsburg grew exponentially as it gained access to key elements of the Industrial Age: coal, railroads and mineral ore.<sup>1</sup> In 1876, the Moffet & Sargent Company completed construction of the Girard and Joplin Railroad between Girard, Kansas and Joplin, Missouri, passing through the area that would become Pittsburg. It was common for railroad companies to purchase land adjacent

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<sup>1</sup> "Enterprising businessmen started city on Prairie," *Pittsburg Almanac*, 31.

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to their tracks for future development, and the Moffet & Sargent Company was no exception. Among their holdings was a depot stop that would soon become Pittsburg. Earlier geological testing indicated that this area of southeast Crawford County contained extensive coal fields that had yet to be tapped. Town fathers founded Pittsburg with this knowledge and the anticipation that coal mining could sustain related industrial and commercial enterprises.<sup>2</sup> When Moffet & Sargent sold the Girard and Joplin Railroad to the St. Louis & San Francisco Railroad Company in 1880, they sold the land containing the town of Pittsburg to the Pittsburg Town Company for \$50,000.<sup>3</sup> The members of the Pittsburg Town Company owned the Oswego Coal Company (later the Rogers Coal Company) and operated Pittsburg's first mine shafts. In 1880 the company's mines produced about "fifty cars of coal per day, employing a force of four hundred men."<sup>4</sup>

Although the closest zinc mines were located in Missouri, by 1883 three large zinc smelters operated in Pittsburg with another under construction nearby.<sup>5</sup> The smelting process required three tons of coal for each ton of zinc, making it optimal to locate smelters nearer the coal source than the zinc mines.<sup>6</sup> By the end of the century, Pittsburg had become a hub for at least four separate rail lines and a flourishing zinc smelting industry.

As the town fathers had imagined, the coal-fueled industrial development supported a large community of workers and gave birth to the city of Pittsburg. By the early twentieth century, Pittsburg boasted fifty-five major coal companies with nearly 12,000 employees, and the city was recognized as "the leading zinc-smelting center in the United States."<sup>7</sup> It was also home to twenty-nine corporations with a combined capitalized value of nearly \$10 million.<sup>8</sup> The population of Pittsburg exploded from a mere 200 citizens at its founding to a population exceeding 10,000 in 1900.<sup>9</sup> In 1910, Pittsburg was a city of 14,755 residents.<sup>10</sup>

Many of the city's most prominent businessmen were involved in coal and zinc concerns as well as real estate. In the early 1920's, it was these men who explored building a hotel downtown, believing it would show the world that Pittsburg was a progressive city.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Cutler, William G. *History of the State of Kansas*. Kansas Collection Books.  
[http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/crawford/crawford-co-p9.html#NEW\\_PITTSBURG](http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/crawford/crawford-co-p9.html#NEW_PITTSBURG). (accessed 14 June 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> *The WPA Guide to 1930s Kansas*. Compiled and Written by the Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration for the State of Kansas. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1984. 504-505.

<sup>8</sup> Frank W. Blackmar, ed., *Kansas: A Cyclopedia of State History, Embracing Events, Institutions, Industries, Counties, Cities, Towns, Prominent Persons, etc.*, Vol. II, (Standard Pub. Co. Chicago : 1912). Transcribed July 2002 by Carolyn Ward. <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/archives/1912/p/pittsburg.html>, (accessed 14 June 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

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**HOTELS IN AMERICA**

The history of urban hotels in large towns and in small cities throughout the United States can be traced back through the major East Coast cities to Europe in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Americans moved west in the nineteenth century, small settlements sprang up to provide services for travelers. The establishment of a tavern, a saloon, and/or a hotel indicated the permanence and stability of a community.<sup>12</sup> The construction of the Stilwell Hotel in 1889 was significant in the early history of Pittsburg, as the railroad depot stop transformed into a full-fledged city.<sup>13</sup>

Following World War I, the nation experienced resurgence in the construction of grand urban hotels. Often subsidized by a local chamber of commerce, local leaders hoped these projects would reinforce civic pride.<sup>14</sup> Hotels erected during this period often had luxurious designs and utilized the most modern building technologies and guest amenities to project an aura of economic vitality and social propriety for the community. Fire had long been a concern for people in urban areas, particularly for large buildings that held many individuals at one time or for tall buildings that would take longer to evacuate in the event of an emergency. Fireproof concrete construction quickly became the norm for hotels. Typical guestroom amenities included private bathrooms and the finest modern finishes and furnishings. The new generation of hotels also contained public and private dining facilities and a grand ballroom for large social functions. Pittsburg's new hotel was to incorporate all of these elements. Notably, the developers of the Besse Hotel erected not only the tallest building in town but also the community's safest, fireproof structure.<sup>15</sup>

**THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE BESSE HOTEL**

The Besse Hotel is an excellent example of urban, high-rise architectural design from the mid-1920s. Cast stone details with a Late Gothic Revival motif and contrasting blond brick ornament the red brick walls. Horizontal beltcourses and an ornamental emphasis on the lower and upper floors define the building's traditional three-part (base, shaft and capital) vertical form. Built to the property lines with massing that steps back as it rises to a narrow L-shaped tower, the massing of the Besse Hotel also reflects the latest trends in building form that were gaining popularity in the nation's larger cities.

New York City's revised zoning regulations, passed in 1916, greatly altered the shape of buildings erected in urban areas across the country. By the early twentieth century, buildings that rose from street level in solid

<sup>11</sup> "Hotel Besse to be ready for use in a year," *Pittsburg Sun*. 18 July 1926.

<sup>12</sup> Karl B. Raitz and John Paul Jones, III, "The City Hotel as Landscape Artifact and Community Symbol," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 9 (Fall/Winter 1988): 18.

<sup>13</sup> The Stilwell Hotel was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on 30 April 1980.

<sup>14</sup> Jakle, John A., Keith A. Sculle, Jefferson S. Rogers. *The Motel in America*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. 25

<sup>15</sup> *Polk's Pittsburg (Crawford County, Kansas) City Directory*. Kansas City: R. L. Polk, 1930. 14.

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vertical masses dominated New York's built environment. Increasingly taller heights prevented sunlight from reaching the street while growing footprints limited air circulation within buildings, raising concerns about health and safety. To address these issues, the city's new zoning regulations required that walls progressively step back from the front façade as the building rose in height. This provided both the building and surrounding lots with more natural light and better ventilation. The resulting ziggurat form became synonymous with America's economic vitality and remained a popular design element through World War II.<sup>16</sup> Less concerned with light and ventilation, leaders in smaller cities, such as Pittsburg, focused on making sure their new landmark buildings reflected the latest architectural fashions. Design, rather than zoning, dictated the massing of the Besse Hotel.

Into the 1920s, architects adapted Late Gothic Revival ornament to tall commercial buildings. The movement is rooted in the work of Boston architects Ralph Adams Cram and Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue. Early in the twentieth century they applied sixteenth century English Gothic precedents to religious and institutional buildings in the United States. Universities and commercial buildings soon adopted the Gothic tradition as well. The United States Military Academy at West Point, Duke University, the University of Chicago, and Princeton University are all examples of this trend. The best known commercial examples of Late Gothic Revival design include Cass Gilbert's Woolworth Building (1913) in New York and the Tribune Tower in Chicago (1923-1925) by Hood and Howells. Gilbert's masterwork has been likened to "a Gothic church seen in one of those distorting mirrors which exaggerate the vertical dimension."<sup>17</sup> On a smaller and simpler scale, the Late Gothic Revival ornament of the Besse Hotel similarly attempts to convey the stature of a European cathedral. At the base of the building, narrow rib-like fingers of cast stone recall buttresses that rise from the first story, directing the eye upward to the building's tower, while at the top of each building section window surrounds incorporate Gothic arches and tracery.

**DEVELOPING THE BESSE HOTEL**

Beginning in 1925, Pittsburg had between six and ten hotels, none of which survived under the same name for more than a decade. Even though some were located on prominent streets, such as Broadway, they were small facilities with a limited number of rooms and only rarely housed a restaurant on premises.<sup>18</sup> None of these other hotels, including the Stilwell Hotel, were of the scale envisioned by the Chamber of Commerce for Pittsburg's grand new hotel.

<sup>16</sup> Carole Rifkind, *A Field Guide to American Architecture*, New York: Plume, 1980, 217.

<sup>17</sup> Marcus Whiffen, *American Architecture Since 1780*, revised edition, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996) 173-177.

<sup>18</sup> C. B. Page Directory Co.'s *Pittsburg, Kansas, City Directory*, Springfield, MO: C. B. Page Directory Company, 1925.  
*Polk's Pittsburg (Crawford County, Kansas) City Directory*, Kansas City: R. L. Polk, 1930, 1940, 1951, 1960, 1970.

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In 1924, Chamber of Commerce President J. A. Gibson appointed a Hotel Committee to research the need for a new hotel and to find a suitable location for the building. The committee included O.L. Stamman and F.C. Werner, both active in real estate; W. A. Beasley, publisher of the *Pittsburg Sun*; and Ira Clemens, a coal operator who would manage the new hotel. Data gathered by Clemens indicated that the northwest corner of Fourth and Locust Streets was the most appropriate site for a new hotel. Being very close to the city's center, it would encourage the expansion of the business district east of Broadway.<sup>19</sup> The Chamber of Commerce purchased the site through donations from more than one hundred of Pittsburg's "bankers, business and professional men and women," whose names were published in the *Pittsburg Sun* in recognition of their contributions.<sup>20</sup>

The Chamber next offered to donate the site to a hotel developer, stipulating that the new structure be "at least a seven-story building, further providing that the building must be fire-proof, have at least 125 guest rooms and contain headquarters for the Chamber of Commerce, dining room, public and private, a coffee shop, and assembly, banquet and ball room."<sup>21</sup>

After several deals collapsed, the Hotel Committee became discouraged, but, as the *Pittsburg Sun* reported, "that same perseverance that has builded [sic] Pittsburg into the sixth ranking city of Kansas, held the committee intact."<sup>22</sup> Being enterprising businessmen, the Hotel Committee devised another strategy, deciding to finance the project entirely with local money. Describing the plan, the *Pittsburg Sun* wrote,

Thus it was proposed to incorporate for \$100,000, sell \$100,000 of 6 per cent preferred stock and include the site at \$100,000, giving with each share of stock, a share of common stock at \$100, then bond for \$200,000, making a total investment of \$400,000 in site and building.<sup>23</sup>

Many of the same individuals who funded the purchase of the site also pledged to purchase stock and to turn over the site to the new hotel corporation. However, the sale of stock was not as eagerly supported as the first campaign. The Hotel Committee was expanded to include J.A. Gibson, head of the Standard Ice and Fuel Company, and T. J. McNally of the Pittsburg Boiler and Machine Works, in order to bring fresh ideas to the table.<sup>24</sup>

When it appeared as if every person in Pittsburg of even moderate means had contributed to the project in some way, the committee remained \$25,000 short of its goal. As frustration returned, Alexander Besse, "financier and a

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<sup>19</sup> "Hotel Besse...."

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> "Hotel Besse...."

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

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man of affairs,"<sup>25</sup> stepped in. Besse had already contributed \$5,000 to the purchase of the site, but he purchased the remaining \$25,000 worth of stock, mortgaging all of his property to amass the sum. In recognition of this effort the hotel was ultimately named in his honor.

**THE BESSE HOTEL**

Through the generous donation of Alexander Besse, the Besse Hotel project moved forward. The Hotel Committee employed architects W. T. Schmitt and Hawk & Parr of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma to design "a modern off-set type structure of twelve stories," rather than the "ordinary seven-story structure" originally proposed.<sup>26</sup> The hotel committee intended "the architecture ... to be of the very latest ... design, and built on similar order to some of the largest and most modern type structures of New York and other eastern cities."<sup>27</sup> To achieve these goals, the architects endowed the hotel with the latest in heating technology, elevator systems, and sanitary facilities. The fire-proof reinforced concrete structure was widely touted in the hotel's advertising campaign. Advertising for the new hotel stressed that "nothing will be left undone by the building or leasing company in making the Hotel Besse one of the finest in the southwest."<sup>28</sup>

The Hotel Committee and the architectural team began meeting with the Wenzel Hotel company, "an operating concern of high financial rating,"<sup>29</sup> to negotiate a 20-year lease on the hotel. The Wenzel Company operated eight Chicago hotels, and agreed to lease the guest spaces and manage the accommodations for \$24,840 per year for the first five years and \$27,324 per year for the next fifteen years.<sup>30</sup> They would also furnish the rooms "with exquisite furnishings of the latest hotel type."<sup>31</sup>

At the direction of the Hotel Committee, the hotel contained a series of commercial storefronts at the ground floor. Most of these spaces could be entered from the hotel lobby and from North Locust or East 4<sup>th</sup> Streets. The committee specifically desired a barber and a tailor as tenants, in addition to offices for the Chamber of Commerce.

Pittsburg builders Asa Messenger and George Dalton secured the contract to erect the hotel with a bid of \$290,086, although construction costs were expected to reach \$300,000 by the time construction got underway.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> "Hotel Besse...."

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

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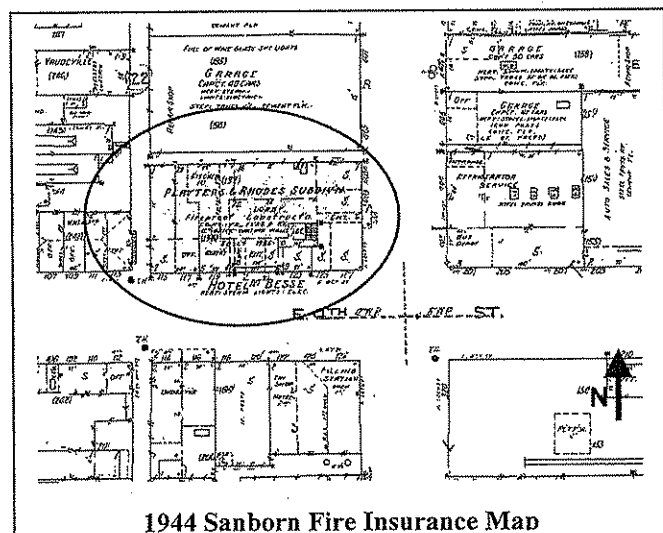
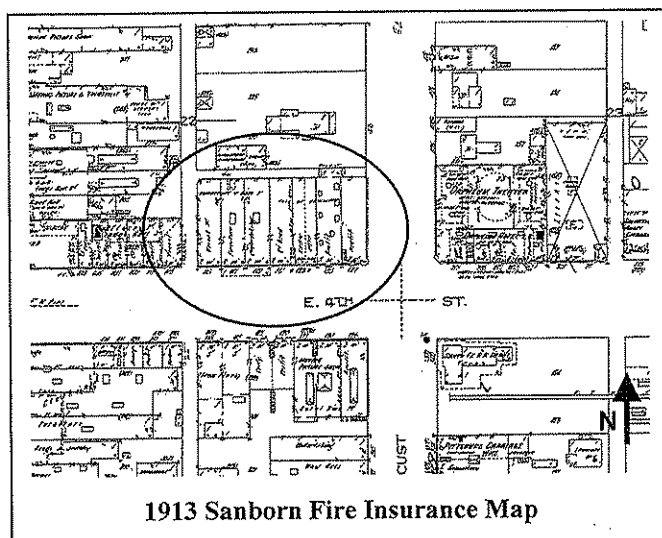
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The contract called for Messenger and Dalton to complete the building "within 260 working days from the time excavations started."<sup>33</sup>

Seven existing two-story buildings had stood on the eastern half of the Besse Hotel block for thirty to forty years.<sup>34</sup> In 1925, they included the Ideal Furniture Company, the Pittsburg Auto Top & Mattress Factory, a rooming house, a pool hall, Farmers Restaurant, and a lunch counter.<sup>35</sup> Demolition of these buildings began on July 5, 1926 and was completed in just a week. Hotel Committee member T. J. McNally, president of the Pittsburg Boiler and Machine Company, loaned one of his company's large steam shovels for the excavation that followed.<sup>36</sup> Construction progressed steadily throughout the following year.



The Besse Hotel opened on June 14, 1927 with two evenings of dedications. The well-attended events consisted of dinner, speeches and musical entertainment. Reservations for each night's 275 tickets were made well in advance. Speakers included hotel manager Ira Clemens and F. C. Werner and W. A. Beasley, members of the original Hotel Committee.

As the hotel committee intended, several specific businesses opened in the hotel's commercial storefronts. Inside the lobby, which was registered as 121 East 4<sup>th</sup> Street, was the Besse Cigar Stand and Postal Telegraph Company. A tailor shop and the Besse Coffee Shop operated at 117 East 4<sup>th</sup> Street and 119 East 4<sup>th</sup> Street, respectively, and a barber shop occupied 123 East 4<sup>th</sup> Street. The other storefronts housed V & C Radio Company at 115 East 4<sup>th</sup>

<sup>33</sup> "Hotel Besse...."

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> C. B. Page Directory Co.'s Pittsburg, Kansas, City Directory. Springfield, MO: C. B. Page Directory Company. 1925.

<sup>36</sup> "Hotel Besse...."

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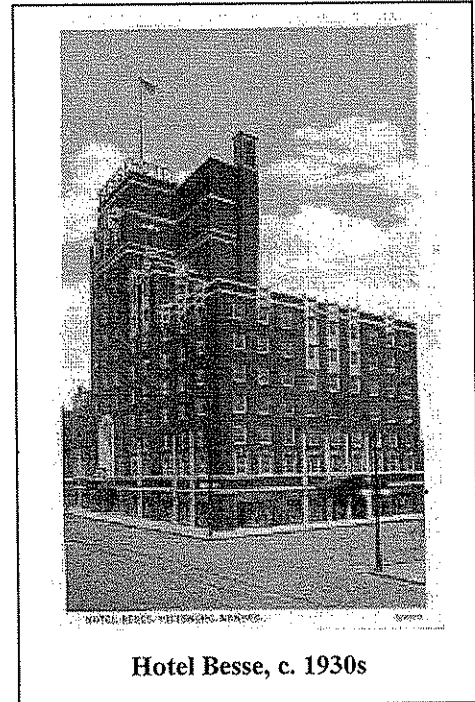
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Besse Hotel  
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Street and Leo F. Costello Investments at 125 East 4<sup>th</sup> Street. Around the corner on Locust Street, were the offices of the Chamber of Commerce at 401 North Locust Street. In 1930, the final commercial space remained vacant.<sup>37</sup>

The coffee shop, the cigar stand, and the office of the Chamber of Commerce remained tenants of the hotel until it closed. A beauty shop was also a consistent tenant. The Vanity Box Beauty Shop opened next door to the barber shop at 125 East 4<sup>th</sup> Street sometime in the 1930s. It moved into a storefront on Locust Street before 1960, operating until the 1980s. By 1990, the French Quarter – The Beauty Shop had replaced the Vanity Box. State Beauty Supply Express occupied the storefront a decade later.<sup>38</sup> Various real estate, insurance, and investment offices opened and closed in the other storefronts. The grand ballroom and the public and private dining rooms of the Besse Hotel became favored hangouts for soldiers posted at Camp Crowder in nearby Neosho, Missouri during World War II.<sup>39</sup>



In 1951 radio station KSEK occupied 115 East 4<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>40</sup> This may correspond to the installation of the radio antennae on the roof of the building. However, by 1960, the Royal Order of Jesters (Masonic) occupied that space.<sup>41</sup> Through the 1970s, many other civic groups were listed at 121 East 4<sup>th</sup> Street, including the Kiwanis and Rotary Clubs.<sup>42</sup> By 1990 and into 2000, the United Mine Workers of America, District 14 occupied the original Besse Coffee Shop location.<sup>43</sup>

The Bitner Realty Company purchased the building in 1969 and operated the hotel until 1979,<sup>44</sup> although rooms on the third floor and above were occupied by permanent residents during the 1970s.<sup>45</sup> These residents were engaged in a broad spectrum of occupations. They included employees of the McNally Pittsburg Manufacturing

<sup>37</sup> Polk's Pittsburg (Crawford County, Kansas) City Directory. Kansas City: R. L. Polk, 1930.

<sup>38</sup> Polk's Pittsburg (Crawford County, Kansas) City Directory. Kansas City: R. L. Polk, 1930, 1940, 1951, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000.

<sup>39</sup> Kennedy, Wally. "Fires Cloud Future of Historic Landmark," *The Joplin Globe*, [www.joplinglobe.com/dailybusiness/local\\_story\\_15721303](http://www.joplinglobe.com/dailybusiness/local_story_15721303), (accessed June 6, 2006).

<sup>40</sup> Polk's Pittsburg (Crawford County, Kansas) City Directory. Kansas City: R. L. Polk, 1951.

<sup>41</sup> Polk's Pittsburg (Crawford County, Kansas) City Directory. Kansas City: R. L. Polk, 1960.

<sup>42</sup> Polk's Pittsburg (Crawford County, Kansas) City Directory. Kansas City: R. L. Polk, 1951, 1960, 1970.

<sup>43</sup> Polk's Pittsburg (Crawford County, Kansas) City Directory. Kansas City: R. L. Polk, 1990, 2000.

<sup>44</sup> Kennedy.

<sup>45</sup> Polk's Pittsburg (Crawford County, Kansas) City Directory. Kansas City: R. L. Polk, 1970.



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Co. and Joe Smith Tabacca [sic] Co.; a broker at Wilbur Weeks Insurance; the Chairman of the Board of the National Bank of Pittsburg; a professor; and several retirees.<sup>46</sup>

By 1980, the hotel was renamed the Besse Apartments and had rental units on every floor, including the first. Some of the occupants were professionals employed with local businesses, but most were retirees.<sup>47</sup> Through the 1990's and into 2000, residents included mostly retirees and students.<sup>48</sup> By 2006, tenants occupied only the second floor of the building, and the vacant upper floors attracted vandals. After three arson fires, the Kansas State Fire Marshall's Office ordered the remaining tenants to vacate the building.<sup>49</sup>

The building remains empty, although current plans propose a tax credit rehabilitation to provide multi-family housing.

**ALEXANDER BESSE**

Alexander Besse was born in La Vout-sur-Loir, France on November 13, 1868. Arriving first in New Orleans at the age of twelve, he worked as an apprentice machinist. By age fourteen Besse was living in Pittsburg, peddling lamp wicks and shoe strings. From these humble beginnings, Alexander Besse grew into a business and civic leader of Pittsburg, Kansas.<sup>50</sup>

Besse had a variety of interests that manifested themselves in his business affairs. He was deeply involved in real estate locally and regionally. Around the turn of the century, he owned a store that sold sewing machines, organs and pianos. While partner in the Besse-Cockerill Coal Company, Besse was a "pioneer in the steam shovel stripping of coal land in this area...and was one of the first to use the bigger shovels in stripping operations."<sup>51</sup> At various times, Besse owned the Oskaloosa Coal Company and was involved in the Pittsburg & Arkansas Zinc Company, as well as other lead and zinc concerns near Joplin and Crestline, Missouri. As treasurer and general manager of the Pittsburg Amusement Company, he oversaw both the Midland and Colonial Theaters in Pittsburg. He was also president of the Metropolis Brick Company. In addition to being a well-known businessman, Besse was a noted but uncelebrated philanthropist, creating a fund that provided milk to underprivileged schoolchildren.<sup>52</sup> After mortgaging all of his holdings to finance construction of the Besse Hotel, Alexander Besse

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> *Polk's Pittsburg (Crawford County, Kansas) City Directory*. Kansas City: R. L. Polk, 1980.

<sup>48</sup> *Polk's Pittsburg (Crawford County, Kansas) City Directory*. Kansas City: R. L. Polk, 1990, 2000.

<sup>49</sup> Kennedy.

<sup>50</sup> "A. Besse, 75, Dies; Funeral is Sunday," *The Pittsburg Headlight*. May 13, 1944. 1.

<sup>51</sup> "A. Besse....," *Pittsburgh Headlight*.

<sup>52</sup> "A. Besse....," *Pittsburgh Headlight*.

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lost everything during the lean years of the Depression. He managed to rebuild his fortune before his death in 1944.<sup>53</sup>

**ARCHITECTS – WILLIAM T. SCHMITT AND HAWK & PARR**

The Hotel Committee hired architects William T. Schmitt and Hawk & Parr to design the Besse Hotel.<sup>54</sup> A 1926 article in the *Pittsburg Sun* mentioned their collaboration but published no additional details about their association.<sup>55</sup> The work of these architects is found throughout Oklahoma and Kansas from the 1910s to the 1930s. They designed mostly civic and institutional structures, incorporating the architectural styles popular at the time, including Classical Revival, Late Gothic Revival, and Art Deco.

William T. Schmitt

The National Register database includes four resources designed by William T. Schmitt that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>56</sup> Two are large institutional buildings in Oklahoma. The Clara Jones Administration Building for Oklahoma City University, designed in 1922-23, is a red-brick structure with a large central tower and restrained Gothic Revival ornament in a complementary light-colored material that shares traits of design and construction with the Besse Hotel. This structure is one of the three buildings contributing to the Oklahoma City University Historic District.<sup>57</sup> The Indian Consistory No. 2, part of the McAlester Scottish Rite Temple in Pittsburg, Oklahoma, is massive brick structure with Classical details on the front and limited Art Deco ornamentation on the rear of the building.<sup>58</sup> Schmitt's work in Kansas included the Scottish Rite Temple in Fort Scott and the Lincoln School in Salina, Kansas.<sup>59</sup> The *Guide to Kansas Architecture* describes the 1915 school building as "one of the best examples of commercial Prairie Style architecture in the state."<sup>60</sup>

<sup>53</sup> *Pittsburg Almanac*. 132.

<sup>54</sup> "Hotel Besse...."

<sup>55</sup> None of the three names appears in *A Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased)* by Henry F. Withey and Elsie Rathburn Withey, (Los Angeles: New Age Publishing Co., 1956). Original drawings and other materials that might describe the relationship between the architectural firms have not been found.

<sup>56</sup> The National Register Information System (NRIS) database is accessible at <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/research/nris.htm>.

<sup>57</sup> The Oklahoma City University Historic District, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978.

<sup>58</sup> The McAlester Scottish Rite Temple, Pittsburg, Oklahoma was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988.

<sup>59</sup> The Roosevelt-Lincoln Junior High School was listed on the National Register in 2006.

<sup>60</sup> David H. Sachs and George Ehrlich, *Guide to Kansas Architecture*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 198.

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Hawk & Parr

James W. Hawk and Josephus O. Parr worked together from 1914 to 1932, building one of Oklahoma's preeminent architecture practices.<sup>61</sup> The National Register database identifies thirteen resources designed by the firm that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. All of these buildings are in Oklahoma, many in Oklahoma City. They include civic and institutional buildings as well as commercial buildings. The firm's portfolio of National Register properties includes county courthouses for Garfield County and McClain County, Oklahoma, as well as the Magnolia Petroleum Building, the Harbour-Longmire Building, and the Hightower Building, and the Pilgrim Congregational Church, all in Oklahoma City.<sup>62</sup> Hawk retired in 1932. Parr continued to practice under his own name until his death in 1940.<sup>63</sup>

**CONCLUSION**

The Besse Hotel was intended to "stand as a monument to the civic pride of Pittsburg,"<sup>64</sup> incorporating modern design and lavish facilities. Local civic leaders initiated the hotel project because they believed the city required a proper grand hotel and because such a facility would promote Pittsburg's prosperity and equality with other progressive cities of its day. In a business district where the average building stands four stories, both then and now, the twelve-story structure is an impressive fixture on the landscape that can be seen from miles away. When construction was first proposed in 1925, such heights were difficult to imagine on the open prairie. According to the *Pittsburg Sun*, "an individual, apparently attempting to measure into the sky the height of the new structure, said yesterday as he gazed skyward: 'Gosh, a feller is liable to sunburn his tonsils trying' to see the top o' that place when they get it done.'"

<sup>61</sup> Personal Correspondence, Jim Gabbert, Oklahoma Historical Society, email to Elizabeth Rosin, Rosin Preservation, LLC, 13 June 2007.

<sup>62</sup> The Garfield County Courthouse and the McClain County Courthouse were both constructed in 1925 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1984. The Magnolia Petroleum Building was listed in 1979, the Harbour-Longmire Building was listed in 1980, the Hightower Building was listed in 2002, and the Pilgrim Congregational Church was listed in 1984.

<sup>63</sup> Personal Correspondence, Jim Gabbert, Oklahoma Historical Society, email to Elizabeth Rosin, Rosin Preservation, LLC, 13 June 2007.

<sup>64</sup> "Hotel Besse...."

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Another, possibly more important, aspect of the Besse Hotel's construction, particularly to the people of Pittsburg, was its completion without any outside assistance. As the *Pittsburg Sun* boasted

Promoted by Pittsburg men, without a dollar of promotion cost; financed with Pittsburg money; erected by Pittsburg contractors, using Pittsburg workers and material, the Hotel Besse will be a civic achievement of real significance.<sup>65</sup>

The city of Pittsburg was proud of what it accomplished for itself and by itself.

When it opened, the hotel was grand. Its modern fire-proof structure and towering height outshone all local competitors. Only the Stilwell Hotel built in 1889 on Broadway and 7<sup>th</sup> Street survived as long as the Besse Hotel. It closed in 1978; the Besse Hotel closed a year later.

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<sup>65</sup> "Hotel Besse...."

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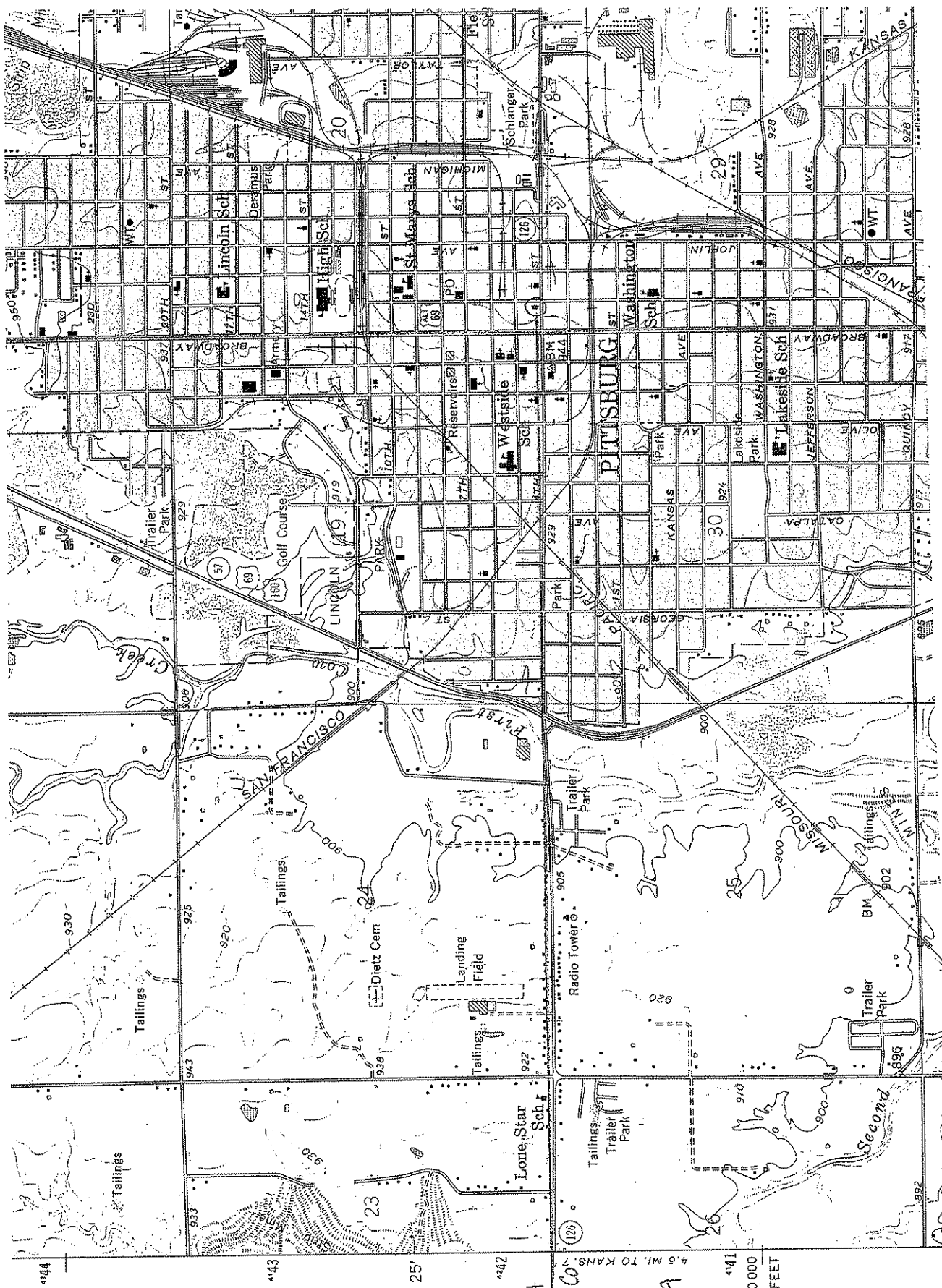
**PHOTOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

**Photographer:** Brad Finch  
F-Stop Photography  
Kansas City, Missouri

**Date of Photographs:** June 2007

**Location of Original Photographs:** Downtown Pittsburg Housing Partners, LP  
7301 Mission Road, Suite 212  
Prairie Village, KS 66208

Photograph Number	Description	Camera View
1.	South elevation	North
2.	North and west elevation	Southeast
3.	East elevation	West
4.	South entrance	North
5.	East entrance	West
6.	Canopy above east entrance	Southwest
7.	Cast stone detail	Northwest
8.	Lobby	East
9.	Stairs from lobby to mezzanine	Southwest
10.	Second floor mezzanine	West
11.	Original elevator cab	Southeast



Besse Hotel  
 121 East 4th Street  
 Pittsburg, Crawford Co.  
 Kansas  
 UTM Reference:  
 15/349248/4141659

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